The controversial Sydney Sweeney ad for American Jeans, with its jeans/genes homophone, illustrates how immersion—the dominant cultural form of late postmodern, late capitalist America—has moved beyond traditional large-scale venues such as movies, sports, theme parks, and concert spectacles (e.g., Taylor Swift). It now appears in a portable form that is easily accessed and instantly engaging. Unlike events fixed to physical locations like theaters or stadiums, the Sweeney ad reaches people wherever they are. Immersion in this form is delivered rather than sought out, and the sociopolitical controversy surrounding the ad heightens its effect, adding layers and responses not found in fixed-location formats.

In his article “Sydney Sweeney Has a Secret,” *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni laments Sweeney’s embrace of constant visibility, suggesting it detracts from the evident skill she demonstrates in roles such as *The White Lotus* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. His observation signals a larger cultural shift: attention itself has become a structured, self-sustaining form of immersion.

The ad’s crafted wordplay, calculated imagery, and viral circulation operate less as conventional product promotion and more as a sustained event of public attention. The jeans almost disappear beneath the layers of commentary, controversy, and online repetition. In this setting, attention is not incidental—it is the commodity. Contemporary capitalism increasingly monetizes the act of looking and registering, even in fleeting and low-effort moments.

The Sweeney campaign shows how attention-based immersion works. It is readily available—surfacing in social media feeds, news coverage, and reposts—and requires no preparation or extended focus. A viewer need only notice the pun, the photograph, or the celebrity link. The payoff is immediate: a momentary flash of

amusement, admiration, or irritation that fixes the ad in the mind. These quick encounters function like condensed versions of larger spectacles, diverting thought and enclosing attention in a brief, self-contained stimulus.

In a culture saturated with such stimuli, attention becomes a constant and accessible mode of immersion. From advertisements to influencer posts and trending hashtags, potential focal points are everywhere, blurring the line between deliberate participation and passive intake. The desire to be entertained, to encounter novelty, or to engage in minor social judgments is satisfied at no cost beyond a glance.

Bruni's concern that Sweeney's public persona overshadows her work reflects a common trade-off in this economy. The enduring image is no longer the performance itself but the endlessly shareable visual fragment. In this minimal form, immersion can be replicated endlessly, independent of narrative or artistry.

This dynamic serves both individual and system. For the viewer, it offers a low-demand diversion and momentary respite. For the digital and commercial system, it produces ongoing cycles of engagement detached from original creative content. The Sweeney jeans/genes ad, therefore, exemplifies attention as immersion—immediate, omnipresent, and adaptable to the rhythms of online discourse—showing how contemporary culture has distilled immersion into a form capable of saturating daily life through the smallest glance.

FRANK BRUNI
Sydney Sweeney Has a Secret
Aug. 11, 2025

By Frank Bruni

Mr. Bruni is a contributing Opinion writer who was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.

Those of us with insomnia have shamefully low bars for our late-night television viewing, which is how I justify my acquaintance with “Echo Valley,” a bonkers new Apple TV+ movie about a mother’s sacrifices for her drug-crazed daughter. It requires not so much the suspension of disbelief as the incineration of it. But it gives its actors a lurid excess of opportunities to suffer nobly or scheme nefariously, so it lured A-listers such as Julianne Moore, whom I’ll follow into almost any valley, gulch or gorge of her choosing, and Domhnall Gleeson, who’d be riveting reciting a recipe for porridge.

Also Sydney Sweeney, who steals the movie from them both.

She plays the cursed daughter to Moore’s mom, though “plays” doesn’t do the performance justice. She reels. Rages. Combusts. During one sequence, as she asks and then terrorizes Moore for money, her desperation metastasizes into a hysteria so raw and so real that I gasped.

Forget Sweeney’s “great jeans.” She has great talent.

Not that anyone would know that from the overwrought, omnipresent, cynically engineered chatter about Sweeney’s cheeky ad campaign for American Eagle. Over the past few weeks, Sweeney the actor has been swallowed whole by Sweeney the pitchwoman, Sweeney the provocateur, Sweeney the partisan chew toy, Sweeney the political riddle. I say that not out of sympathy for her — she’s obviously a willing, witting participant in at least some of this. I say it out of sadness for the rest of us and for a society in which attention is a greater currency than artistry, professional distinction is too often a mere steppingstone to ambient celebrity and objects of admiration turn into endlessly deconstructed objects of curiosity, both against their wishes and by their own design.

Can’t actors just be actors, musicians just musicians and athletes just athletes without conscription into our culture wars? Must they exploit their prominence for maximum profit or be exploited as social media fodder? I barely remember the performances that won Gwyneth Paltrow and

Matthew McConaughey their Oscars; those golden moments receded behind the dross of all the merchandising they've done, all the cultural baggage they took on, as they traveled a drearily familiar arc from being celebrated for their artistic achievements to being famous for being famous.

George Clooney — whose suavity has been used to hawk watches, coffee, tequila — won praise for his lead role in the Broadway production of "Good Night and Good Luck" this year, but I bet more Americans are familiar with the role he played in last year's presidential race, entering the fray by publicly questioning President Joe Biden's cognitive state and beseeching him not to run for re-election. Starring alongside Clooney in the 2024 election was Beyoncé, who blessed the use of her song "Freedom" as a campaign anthem for Vice President Kamala Harris and took the stage with her at a Houston rally — an appearance that President Trump recently railed against, calling for a criminal investigation into it. Amid such ridiculousness, a person could briefly lose track of Beyoncé's musical genius. And of her own denim evangelizing — for Levi's.

Not all celebrity endeavors and endorsements are created equal. Occasionally they reflect genuine conviction, real caring, altruistic goals. But there's something crass and confusing about so many successful entertainers' readiness to stray into just about any arena of American life. And there's something about the digital age and social media that has mixed their various ventures together more thoroughly than ever before, into a sort of all-purpose dough, a.k.a. brand, that can be stretched, shaped and cooked this way and that, in accordance with a star's appetite for influence and income.

Sweeney's hunger is immense, as Doreen St. Félix observed in an excellent essay in The New Yorker. "She spoke plainly, in an interview from three years ago, about how acting can't pay her bills," St. Félix wrote. "She takes advertising deals that seem beneath her." In The Times, Yola Mzizi tallied the sources of Sweeney's supplemental income: "She's smiling while holding up a face cream in an ad on the subway and pops up when customers are placing orders at Baskin Robbins. She's taking awkward

selfies with the latest Samsung flip phone or trying to convince you that pink fuzzy loafers are cool. She sells her bath water." That's not to mention her swimsuit collection. And she reportedly has a lingerie line in the works. That frenzy of commercialism distinguishes Sweeney, who's all of 27. So does her instinct for impact. While she and the creators of the American Eagle ads couldn't have foreseen the exact chain of events by which those ads would become a cultural flashpoint — the supposedly widespread outrage among progressives was exaggerated and promoted by right-wing agitators, as Ken Bensinger and Stuart A. Thompson wrote in The Times — they must have sensed that the exaltation of her "blue eyes" and the genes/jeans wordplay would draw a certain kind of notice. Generate a certain manner of discourse. And that Sweeney, Sweeney, Sweeney would be discussed ad nauseam.

But not in terms of the accomplishments that initially brought her renown and made her current ubiquity possible. The fuss over Sweeney's body obscures an extraordinary body of work. "The White Lotus," "Euphoria," "The Handmaid's Tale," "Sharp Objects" — she's prestige TV royalty. For a reason: She nails almost every role and almost every scene.

Her performance in the 2023 HBO movie "Reality" — about Reality Winner, the N.S.A. contractor convicted of leaking a classified intelligence report to The Intercept — is an exquisitely subtle wonder in which the slightest shifts in her posture and the fleeting darting of her eyes convey the secrets she's keeping and the control she's on the verge of losing as two F.B.I. agents press her to come clean about what she has done.

Her performance in the 2024 horror flick "Immaculate" — about a mysteriously pregnant nun-to-be — is the operatic opposite of that. It culminates in howls of fury that maintain their bone-rattling, bloodcurdling intensity longer than seems humanly possible. They transform the movie, a dollar-store descendant of "Rosemary's Baby," into a grotesque, gory analogue of "Sophie's Choice."

I like to think that if I had a gift like Sweeney's, I'd be purely devoted to it. Wholly sated by it. And too grateful for my genes to care much about my or anybody else's jeans.